

Dim Stars (with lines borrowed from Keats)
for Alan, with gratitude

What holds aloft our brightest stars is far
from that which keeps us in our petty place.
Our splendor lies in standing by, dim stars
kept far from center stage and left by fate
to the vagaries of a writer's hand.
We, the staid and steadfast supporting cast,
content to swell and fall within the sad
schemes of a cinematic lower class
believe mere anonymity. On screen
we sing our songs in minor keys; at home,
we're more than that—we're heroes no one sees.
And this is why we sojourn here, alone
and palely loitering: though it be tame,
without our light all bright stars look the same.

Snapshots, Faded

I.

In her favorite photo Venice is awash in purple
twilight, and the lights reflected in the water
are gold flakes haphazardly strewn
across some grand royal cloak. The canal

curves at center frame, bends to the top
corner of the photo and empties off screen
into the cold Adriatic. Gondoliers lie
in limbo here, stuck as they are

between piers and passing livelihoods
out in the open lane. The boats fringe
the edges of the picture like epaulettes
on some Vaudevillian general's coat

and beside them, ancient buildings gaze down
upon the scene, sentinels omniscient and still.
Water taxis conspire in the lower left corner like lovers
plotting a tryst. A moment before the shutter's click,

"Hurry," she'd whispered. "The light..."

and then: gone, as though the moment never happened.
But happen it did, and there it stays—caught and saved
for posterity in a faded purple photo propped
atop a dusty upright piano rarely played.

II.

State Street traffic courses north to the Lake Erie shore,
dozens and dozens of gemstones blinking like Christmas
lights in this cool August night. Cars and trucks, buses and bikes
cruise the Dock where the earnest honesty of youth is alive

and coursing through the streets. Horns yip
here and there. Radios thump too-heavy bass.
Yeah, the kids are all right tonight...but for how long?
College calls for some, but blue-collar careers lie ahead

for most. Replacements for a Rust Belt bourgeoisie.
For tonight, each is simply himself, satisfied enough
to live in the moment, in these tiny droplets of now that fall
and fall to coalesce into formless, shapeless semblances

of “who I am” and “what I’ll be.” One day these snapshots
of what *is* will turn into what *used to be*.
Soon, they’ll be all that’s left.

In the marina and Misery Bay moonlight
bathes the hulls of boats, slow ghosts
haphazardly blockading the beach. Just barely
can he still make them out in his favorite image of home:
a faded purple photo snapped when he was just a boy.

Envoi.

Motion is merely light and its myriad tricks,
trompes l’oeil patterned out of time and space.

Light is Energy open to interpretation,
Force the desire in a young man’s heart.

In time and space, no open lanes, no coursing streets,
no trysts or drops of now. Only echoes, faint echoes,
falling like pale specters, long adrift and fading fast.

Rain on Parade Street

It's like the rain's already dirty when it comes down on this side of town. The dust don't settle, there's no fresh smell. The windows on the buses and the bars just streak yellow-brown covered as they are in the gritty filth of the city. Nothing here gets washed. That's why nothing bad ever washes away. Nothing ever, *ever* comes to be made new. You could say the leaves on the trees sprout each Spring and, yes, the grass does grow, but even then the green seems dull and dingy when it comes. As though the grass and the trees got that sickle-cell like I got.

I live on Parade Street. But I've never seen a parade. Ain't been no parades on this street for as long as I been here. 15 years. My Grandma often makes a joke: "I hope it never rains on YOUR parade, child," then she smiles and laughs like she just seen Jesus. But living in this house, I laugh very little. I ain't never seen a parade and ain't never seen Jesus. And on days like today, when it rains like it's raining now, seems damn sure to me I'll see the one long, *long* before I ever see the other.

Parking Lot

A parcel of land.
Sea of asphalt
and day-glo paint
with lines and lines
of immutable geometry
scoring its tarred skin.

Blacktopped acres
like rough scabs
or shiny scars
on the surface
of my county,
my city,
my country
(...tis of thee...)

Of thee I sing:
land where the pine
trees died, land of the
merchants' pride
from every Gander Mountain site

let commerce ring!

Parking lot. Ocean
of absence. Here, nothing
more than a surrogate
sea for seagulls
feasting on French fries
and cast off crusts
from Krispy Kreme. Can you see?
Carnage camouflaged
by the oxymoron of order.

Parking lot.
Parcel of land. Incongruous
cacophony of silent nights
and contrapuntal days
awash in the clatter
of rats racing
feet pounding
hearts beating
breaking
braking

broken
broken
broken down
breakdown
belts slipping
batteries dying
bumper
 to
 bumper
breakfast
breaktime
smoke break
coffee break
impromptu rest stop
on a lifelong
highway journey
ending
here.

Where?

Parking lot.

Parcel of land,
paved for the people.

Man of the Cloth

Londoners see me in my sackcloth shirt
and think I don't hear their whispers asking

where my ashes are. I am not penitent,
I say. I have a duty.

I never let on my secret. No one knows I mourn
two sons, each dead

at the hands of that traitorous Scot,
the brigand, William Wallace.

My own William, not yet twenty,
fell at Stirling Bridge. I'm told

he drowned under the weight of his ragged armor
when the crush of battle pushed him

into the Forth. Owen, barely seventeen,
took a Scottish arrow to the throat

at Falkirk, bled to death before
the monks could drag him

to their oxcart. Owen never once drew a sword,
never once swung an axe, never

notched an arrow to fire at his enemy.
Since then I've lopped the heads

off a hundred criminals and I see the boy in all of them.
I swing the axe anyway.

In the year of our Lord thirteen hundred and five
his Royal Highness Edward Longshanks

called on me to do my duty before God
and my countrymen.

I stepped to the plinth, swung my axe
as I have done countless times for lesser men.

In the name of the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Ghost I genuflect.

For my own trinity of King and country
and the sons that I've lost

I granted the rebel traitor William Wallace the freedom
his men afforded my boys

by freeing his neck
from the burden of his head.

Stream Unconsciousness

Bitterness is a rose
tattoo left long untouched,
and gone to seed,
its blotchy ink
now bleeding through
her mottled, milky skin

the bloated lines,
once crisp in youth,
are fat with age and pocked
with limpid liver spots—
how mockingly
they blur the lines
between fondness and regret

'til of an evening—
buoyed by wine
and too few cigarettes—
the words that come
will help her none
and then won't ever
come again

yes bitterness is
what she leaves
herself, what she
fashions out of fantasy
to wrap around her
misery, what she clutches
to her comfort zone,
her bubble
her personal space
her aura and her chi,

where, once it settles
over her shoulders,
once she finds herself
encompassed
it hardens in good
faith, like a carapace,
or candy shell, or better
yet a Kevlar vest,
until she knows
she's bulletproof,

above reproach,
untouchable
the way she used to be
before she somehow chose
a Hobson's choice
of muddied paths,
her sullied soul made
mystery to you and me
and anyone she ever loved
or left behind, all
the ones who mattered
when everything was
all but gone, and poof!
the vestiges of yesterday
left shredded and tattered,
so much so that little of it matters

and all she can seem to say
is "What did I do wrong?
What did I do wrong?"
before the truth
pokes through the misty
morning serenade only
she can hear, and maudlin
reality removes the romance
from her over-lidded eyes

now she settles herself
down, slowly shuts her eyes,
and succumbs somehow
to a long, unhealthy sleep.

Spring Fever

I.

Cold water, grey and greasy
trickles the length of my forearm
to the wrinkles and bumps of my elbow,

falls to the floor where I swipe at it
with my stockinged right foot. I'm
too lazy to fetch a rag or paper towel,

and I hardly mind the damp spot under my foot.
I hardly notice it at all. I'm focused
on the job of scrubbing through futility,

of trying to erase the dingy dross clinging
to the door of our fridge after January,
February, and March, which came in

like a lion but promises now to go out
like a lamb. Easter Sunday waits
on the other side of sleep. I scrub some more.

The smell of vinegar and naphthalene
lingers in the fibers of my shirt
as I strip away the day, shower for tomorrow.

II.

Today the sun is more a prankster
than the savior I envisioned it to be
when first I stumbled out of bed.

I can't hear it, but instead I feel the laughter,
snide and cruel, as the rays of sun, bright
and nearly forgotten, splash into the room

disturbing the dog hairs and dust
motes as they flee my wife and our vacuum
in the futile hope of finding somewhere safe.

She'll catch it all—dog hairs and dust,
finger oil and filth accumulated
over the dark transition from fall

to spring, those months of darkness

where sleep and Saturdays serve
as the only respite from drudgery,

and joy only comes in fits and starts
of the banal bacchanalia we call
the Holidays. Shiver as the weather shifts.

False Foundation

Atlas never shrugged.

Atlas never shirked the world,
never set aside the planet
in deference to his comfort,
annoyance, or irritation.

Atlas never flinched.

Far too busy, he was,
staying strong, steadfast,
a rock
holding up the heavens
to separate eternity
from the petty squabbles
and feeble foibles of our
fumbling forebears.

Atlas wouldn't shrug.
He didn't have it in him.

And even had he stumbled,
our world would not have stopped
for he was never sentenced
to hold aloft our globe, never doomed
to bear the Earth upon his back.

His sentence as you know it
is a lie.

Atlas never shrugged.

Cherry Blossoms

after Olena Kalytiak Davis

If I am Reader then you are Wanderer
—graceful wordmother—
—facile textmonger—
fragile as night flowers, tactile as ice.

Who will love us thus unbidden?

I wish for me that you'd return
to where you've never been

as Astrophel to Stella...
I have fallen for your pixels.

Is commerce love, love a commodity?
Our stock in trade: words, the currency of the lie
the bittersweet,
the open and shut case of you
and me, we before the storm,
before God,
before the fall, before night

comes calling and all that exists right here
(right now?)
is sweat and grief and
"Kashmir" playing a half-measure too
slow on a beaten 80s boombox.

What do the letters spell?
What defines the scent of rain in Spring?
Where is your hand? I want
to touch it,

I want to disappear. I must.

Read this. Meanwhile I'll
wander. You'll read and I'll saunter through days
pondering the lie and this my new name.

The Commodore Takes Command

Through the smoke and haze of war,
through sweetwater swells and the violent
bursts of cannon shells

a shifting wind brings a changing tide
and flight turns to fancy
as the commodore takes command.

His former flagship fallen, aflame,
her sails in tatters, her crew—shattered in the
onslaught of carronades and grapeshot,

the young man sets his orders,
unfurls his flag, and faces down his foe.
The commodore takes command

of a new vessel, held back from battle, lying
in wait. Under his hand, she surges forth
like a hound unchained.

Below decks the men are ready, above decks—
all hands. With each rivulet of sweat and spit,
the British line nears.

Through cannon fire and rifle fire and flotsam
tinged with blood, through screams of men in agony,
the *Niagara* rears her head.

And in command the Commodore comes,
feathering his sails. With raking fire down both
broadships, the *Niagara* splits the line.

The Old Guard dies.
A New Nation stays.

And after the haze and fog of battle: the tedium
of life. Bodies to bury. Wounds to heal. More travel
and more wars. Aboard ship now, the commodore
sighs, takes quill and ink in hand.

*"Dear General,
we have met the enemy..."*